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MIDDLE EAST

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SYRIAN PRESIDENT HAFEZ ASSAD SHUFFLED HIS COUNTRY'S MILITARY COMMAND TODAY, BRINGING IN AS CHIEF OF STAFF THE HEAD OF THE SYRIAN TEAM THAT NEGOTIATED LAST SPRING'S GOLAN HEIGHTS DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT WITH SECRETARY OF STATE HENRY A. KISSINGER.

MAJ. GEN. HIKMAT SHEHABI, IN HIS MID 40S, HEADED SYRIA'S MILITARY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE BEFORE ASSAD PROMOTED HIM FROM BRIGADIER AND GAVE HIM THE ARMY'S TOP POST. HE REPLACED MAJ. GEN. YOUSSEF SHAKKOUR, CHIEF OF STAFF DURING LAST OCTOBER'S MIDDLE EAST WAR.

SHAKKOUR WAS MADE A DEPUTY DEFENSE MINISTER, AS WAS MAJ. GEN. NAJI JAMIL, COMMANDER OF THE SYRIAN AIR FORCE. THE THIRD DEPUTY TO DEFENSE MINISTER MUSTAFA TLAS IS MAJ. GEN. AWAD BAGH OF ARTILLERY.

THE CHANGES, MADE BY PRESIDENTIAL DECREE, WERE THE FIRST IN SYRIA'S ARMED FORCES HIERARCHY SINCE THE OCTOBER WAR.

THEY CAME AS SYRIA'S GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED PRESS CHARGED THAT ISRAEL WAS PREPARING TO LAUNCH A FIFTH WAR WITH THE ARABS, A CHARGE ISRAEL HAS MADE REPEATEDLY AGAINST SYRIA.

SHEHABI IS A LONG-TIME CONFIDANT OF ASSAD. HE LED A SYRIAN MILITARY TEAM TO WASHINGTON LAST SPRING TO NEGOTIATE WITH KISSINGER SYRIA'S TERMS FOR A SEPARATION OF FORCES WITH ISRAEL ON THE HIGH GROUND SEPARATING THE COUNTRIES.

THE EVENTUAL SIGNING OF THE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT HELPED OPEN THE WAY FOR RICHARD M. NIXON TO BECOME THE FIRST AMERICAN PRESIDENT TO VISIT SYRIA. NIXON AND ASSAD ANNOUNCED DURING THE VISIT THE RENEWAL OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN WASHINGTON AND DAMASCUS, SEVERED DURING THE 1967 MIDDLE EAST WAR.

THE RADIO BROADCASTS ANNOUNCING THE SHAKEUP GAVE NO OFFICIAL REASON FOR IT.

IN ADDITION TO THE DAMASCUS CHARGES OF AN IMPENDING ISRAELI ATTACK ON SYRIA, LEBANESE NEWSPAPERS CLAIMED IN BEIRUT THAT THE SOVIET UNION HAS WARNED PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS THAT ISRAEL "IS ABOUT TO DEAL A MAJOR MILITARY BLOW ON ONE OR MORE ARAB FRONTS."

THE PRESS REPORTS CHARGED THAT ISRAEL WAS PREPARING FOR A TWO-PRONGED OFFENSIVE ACROSS ITS FRONTIERS WITH SYRIA AND LEBANON. THE OBJECTIVE WAS SAID TO BE "THE DESTRUCTION OF SYRIA'S MILITARY POWER AND THE ELIMINATION OF THE PALESTINIAN GUERRILLA PRESENCE IN LEBANON."

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